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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1991, the Master of Arts in Teaching program of The School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont, created a position to mentor newly arrived, full time adjunct faculty in their adjustment to a nontraditional program that operates as a community and provides experiential learning. This paper describes a group of five teacher educators coming together to learn from each other and to reflect on their own teaching. Three broad objectives of the group were to: support the professional development of all group members; increase awareness of how discussions work and increase skills at facilitating them; and increase awareness of student feedback and become more skilled at seeing, eliciting, and utilizing it. The document provides a framework for examining: the group's structure; key elements to the group's success--shared language and similar values; group skills including listening, giving feedback in nonthreatening and responsible ways, receiving feedback with equanimity, and remaining open; shared decision making; administrative support; the mentor's role; the evolution of the group; and questions, concerns; and future directions. An appendix provides an example of a journal entry. (LL)

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Mentoring Each Other:
Teacher Educators as Learners of Teaching

by Carol R. Rodgers

with Marti Anderson, William Conley, Paul LeVasseur and Leslie Turpin

The MAT Program of The School for International Training
Brattleboro, Vermont

May 27, 1993

Originally presented at the Intl. TESOL Conference in Atlanta, Ga. April 15, 1993

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This paper will describe how one group of five teacher educators came together to reflect on its teaching. The evolution of our group has been nothing if not organic; it is the purpose of this paper to try to codify in more objective terms what has been a very subjective process; to hold it up for examination and scrutiny, to identify where it is strong, where it has chinks, what might be serendipitous and what might be purposely chosen and used again. The focus will be primarily on our process rather than on the content with which we worked . This is because while the content is, perhaps, unique to us, the process, we would hope, is transferable to others.

I will start by giving the reader a brief history of how the group was formed and a description of how the group worked. I will also briefly outline the role that I played as mentor. I will then move on to examine the elements that we felt contributed to the success of the group. At this point, I will take a look at how the group has evolved over its two year life time and look at where our next steps might lead us. Before closing, I will take a brief foray into the importance of teacher educators' reflecting on their own teaching. Finally, I will look at the questions and concerns that remain.

History

Why the group was formed

Slightly more than two years ago, in the fall of 1991, a position was created to support newly arrived, full time adjunct faculty in their adjustment to our program. Administrators had noted that new[1] faculty often experienced a difficult period of adjustment that they were left to cope with on their own. This sometimes led to difficulties in the classroom and to intervention and counseling/training on the part of the directors. Such actions did not necessarily indicate "bad" teaching on the part of the new faculty. Adjustment is, after all, normal. Add to this the fact that our program, unlike a conventional university, has well-hewn norms (we operate as a community) and ways of teaching and learning (experiential),

[1] Although I refer to them as "new," the teachers with whom I worked had already been teaching between three and fours years in the program.

along with a faculty that has a long history with each other (faculty tend to come and stay) and you have an environment where it is not so easy to slide in, "do your thing" and disappear. A new teacher is adjusting simultaneously to the classroom and to a whole culture: a way of doing things, a way of speaking and way of acting. This is a challenge even for the most talented teacher.

While the Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program is a strong community -- it seeks to be supportive and acknowledges teaching as a ongoing process of learning -- it is also a very busy place with teachers doing too much with too little time. For new faculty to ask for help from colleagues, therefore, is difficult. What is true for teachers in other schools is also true for us; there is a reluctance to ask for help from colleagues for fear of impinging on their time and of being perceived as weak and inadequate. (Little, 1990) Compound this the fact that these are teacher educators who should "know their stuff" and you have double indemnity against these teachers asking for help.

So a position was created for a mentor to new faculty. There was no job description that accompanied the position. It was generally assumed that the mentor would aid new faculty in their transition into the program, providing support and feedback as necessary. When I was appointed to the position, I thought back to my own experience as a new faculty member. I remembered how intimidating it now was to be teaching among colleagues who had once been my own teachers, feeling that when I spoke, they still saw me as a student. As mentor I wanted to be able to provide the faculty I was working with--all of whom had once been students in the program--with the experience of being listened to as equals. I wanted to give them a place where they could voice their ideas and their doubts without fear of being judged.

In addition to creating a safe place to grow, I wanted to dissolve the membranes of isolation I knew new faculty operated behind. Despite an ethos of sharing at MAT, I have sometimes found that "sharing" slides into advice giving, coaching or even boasting. I wanted to create an environment of fellow explorers where community would flourish.

Although the mentees were relatively new to the program they all came to it with years of teaching and training experience and I knew they had a great deal to offer each other. This, coupled with an awareness of limits on my own time (I was paid for 30 contact hours) led me to consider forming a

mentor *group*. I consulted with the faculty with whom I would be working, got their approval, and we have called ourselves the Mentor Group ever since. I have remained the official mentor but the group has mentored each other, including me.

Objectives of the group

The objectives of the group were originally determined by me in consultation with the program directors, with students ("What do you think teachers in this program need to work on most in their teaching?") and with the members of the group. Three broad objectives guided our work:

1) To support the professional development of all group members.

2) To increase awareness of how discussions work and to increase skills at facilitating them.

3) To increase awareness of student feedback and become more skilled at seeing, eliciting and utilizing it.

While teachers customized these objectives to fit their own needs, and while they ramify into a number of other areas (group facilitation, for example) they have remained our primary objectives throughout the two years. It is worth noting here that staying with a limited number of objectives over an extended period of time has allowed us to explore their accompanying issues in depth. We find we are far from exhausting their possibilities and that they provide a home base as we wander into adjacent territory.

A sampling of the issues we dealt with include:

- How do we remain fully open to and present with students?
- What characterizes "the right question" in a discussion? Is there *a* right question?
- What is the line between in-depth feedback and therapy?
- What makes a group form a community? How much can a teacher realistically do to "make" it happen?

- When do students benefit from being pushed/challenged, and when are they better served by being supported and listened to without being pushed?

The structure of the group

The structure of the group, while changing slightly every semester, has remained relatively uniform. We meet once every two weeks for two hours in the fall and spring semesters. In the winter we are flung hither and yon on supervision assignments and have found it impossible to meet. We generally meet in one of our offices, large enough, though barely, to fit five. (My own theory is that this tightness of space promoted a feeling of closeness. As I am fond of telling my students, when the energy in a room has nowhere to leak to, it remains to charge class discussions with intellectual and emotional heat.)

Each fall we chose to work with video tapes of our own teaching. Before each meeting, one of us would video tape his or her class, view the tape on his or her own, choose a five to ten minute clip, write a journal entry analyzing that clip (see the appendix for an example of a journal entry), and circulate it to the others before our meeting.

During the first hour of the meeting we focused on the journal entry and video clip. We would discuss the journal entry first--a decision with no particular principle behind it. What happened, though, was that the discussion would take us immediately past a description of what had transpired on the tape and into the issues that the teacher was exploring. Then, when we viewed the tape, we were able to contextualize what we saw in a larger field of ideas, tentative theories and questions. Another possible drawback of starting with the tape is that it is very easy to get caught up in the it, discussing everything that comes to the attention of the group -- and even I five minutes, there's a lot. By going to the journal entry first, we tended to do better at staying with the issues that were important to the author.

At the end of this first hour, we left five minutes for feedback. This was a chance for the author to synthesize some of his or her thoughts as well as give the group feedback on what had been useful or not useful about they way they had worked. It also provided the group time to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings and ideas.

The final hour of each session was reserved for check-in with each member. We had ten minutes for each of us to talk about how things were going. Often members would refer to their list of personal objectives at this time. Alternatively, it was a time to share difficulties and successes both in the classroom and within the program. We would end this hour with general feedback on the session.

In an attempt to keep a record of our learning I began to write up an account of each meeting from my notes, sharing what I had written with the group for comments. This process led to further exploration of our questions and ideas in writing. While we have just begun to explore this way of working it holds out exciting possibilities for future work together. Before moving into the future, however, I will take an in-depth look at some of the elements which the group feels has figured in its past and present success.

Why we think it worked

This winter, as a way of preparing for a presentation we gave on the Mentor Group at the International TESOL Conference in Atlanta, the group met to brainstorm elements which we felt had been key to our success. We readily acknowledged that we started with a great many advantages--advantages that others who might want to start similar groups may not have. To be specific, we shared a similar language for teaching and learning and a similar set of values about the teaching-learning process. We were lucky to start as friends and as colleagues who already respected each other's teaching and thinking. In addition, all but one of us were graduates of the program in which we teach (I was not but I had taken two courses as a special student ten years ago). We were also teachers who were skilled in group work--in listening, confronting, giving and receiving feedback, taking responsibility for our own feelings and ideas and staying open to one another. An additional factor in our success was a process of shared decision making; while the mentor was clearly the leader, most of the decisions were joint ones. Finally, we had the support of the administration who had given money to the position of mentor. I would like to look at each of these elements separately.

A shared language and similar values

We understood each other in the Mentor Group. We understood the kind of teachers we each strove to be and we understood the language we

used to describe both the goal and the journey there. Because we had all been indoctrinated as students into the special humanistic, student-centered mores of the program, we shared an ethos that we all affirmed as valuable. There was little if any sound of clashing paradigms and we rarely had to stop to explain the foundation of our beliefs; these beliefs were familiar and shared. Because we had this shared pool of beliefs and experience we were also able to choose what we wanted to work on without the need for a prolonged explanation or a prepared defense. We could count on our aspirations and goals being respected and heard. There were, of course, variations of interpretation, which have provided us with some of our richest exchanges, but we shared the broad goals and values of the program.

Along with this shared culture came a shared language. Terms like *structured and ongoing feedback, an understanding response, reacting versus responding, and inner criteria* hold special significance for both faculty and students at MAT. It has been noted[2] that the way we talk about our work is comprehensible to everyone within the program, but may need to be translated for a foreigner to our program's culture. Fair enough. And yet, as I have said elsewhere, I feel a common language has been crucial to the success of the group--perhaps it is of any group. [3] Rardin and Tranel make this point in talking about the role that language plays for learners of foreign languages. What she says of language learners is easily transferable to our situation:

> While a person's experiencing has unique and individual qualities to it which he alone can grasp in their wholeness, it can only be talked about in language which has inherited from his cultural background and, therefore, in concepts whose meaning is shared by the cultural

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[2] Fellow faculty who spend much of their time outside the program have pointed out the dangers of making ourselves incomprehensible to the outside. Their point is well taken and addressed elsewhere in this paper. Alumni of the program have also noted how difficult it is to communicate with other "non-alumni" once they leave the program. It is an issue, though not necessarily a problem, that needs to be addressed. [See Rodgers (1993, unpublished paper), "the Nature and Incidence of Reflection among Graduates of the Masters of Arts in Teaching Program of the School for International Training" for further discussion.

[3] Bryk and Driscoll, in their report on schools as communities, quote Judith Warren Little who notes that teachers from schools with strong communal cultures "develop a common language with which to discuss curricular and other work-related problems. Such collegiality can...reduce the teacher's sense of isolation and vulnerability and provide an arena for peer recognition and encouragement."

> group. In his self-interpretation as an individual, the person is inextricably bound to the common culture of his community, with its own understanding of the meaning and significance of experience. (pp. 5, 6; 1988)

If a group of teachers coming together for the first time does not already share such a common language, I imagine that much of each member's time might be spent translating each other's contributions into his or her own "language of teaching." This could cause things to move considerably more slowly. Alternatively they might develop a language of their own. This could, in fact, prove inspiring if the group members are willing to loosen their individual grips on their personal world views and create a new one collectively. We, by contrast, with our "short-hand language," are cut off from this possibility. By using our short hand language, we may well be assuming too much and missing important differences--differences that could yield productive discussion and insight...and the possibility of creation.

In addition to sharing similar values and common language, one of the critical elements of our success was our personal relationship with each other. We genuinely like each other. This is one of those things that I labeled as "serendipitous" at the beginning of this paper. Yet because we already knew each other quite well several things happened. First, because we were familiar with each other's personal as well as professional stories, a larger context for what was shared in the group was present. We could see each other in the way that we sought to see our students--as "whole persons." We moved easily between our professional and personal selves.[4] (A dichotomy I have always felt was somewhat false to begin with.) In fact, we set aside fifteen extra minutes at the beginning of each meeting for "schmooze time."

A final but not unimportant aspect of our relationship with one another has been a shared sense of humor, which, in retrospect, seems vitally important. It allowed us to never to take ourselves or our teaching too seriously, which, when you are looking intensely at both, is a good thing.

In enumerating the various ways in which we were a compatible group, it should be noted that we were also all white (three women and two men), between the ages of 35 and 45, parents of young, pre-school children

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[4] This was first eloquently expressed by Marti Anderson, one of the group members, in her section of our TESOL presentation in Atlanta, April 1993.

(except Paul who is not a parent), married, middle class, and, despite extensive periods of living and working abroad, still American. This is not to suggest that diversity necessarily leads to division, nor that homogeneity leads to harmony. In fact, if one scratches the surface of even the most homogeneous group, tremendous differences of style, belief, humor, taste, and values still abound.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, being friends and respected colleagues made it easier for us to trust each other. The Mentor Group was a very safe place in which to reveal our private teacher selves. While there was certainly potential for judgment of each other and a building oneself up on the ruins of another's disaster, this did not happen. I cannot explain why this was so, but it is perhaps due to the norms of the program. In fact, we often saw destructive group behavior in our students, and maybe this kept us on the *qui vive* for the same behavior in ourselves.

In addition, it was always clear that the group was not evaluative in nature. Its purpose was to provide support for further growth. If judgment of our teaching had been a part of our work, the safety we enjoyed would have been seriously jeopardized.

While shared values, a common language, and the desire to be with each other in a supportive way were all contributing factors, there remains the fact that we came to the group with certain group building/group sustaining skills. Without such skills the closet of friends with the best of intentions can run amok.

Group Skills

Because so much of the teaching and learning at MAT is done in small groups, we are constantly dealing with the forces of group dynamics. We are always learning how to listen better, how to respectfully challenge one another, how give feedback in non-threatening and responsible ways, how to receive feedback with equanimity, how to "stay with" a person in his or her struggle to understand his or her teaching, and how to stay open. If we don't practice these skills, we don't survive. And even if we don't always do them well, we do know what they look like. I would like to give a brief overview of each.

Listening well means more than being able to repeat back to a person what they have just said. It means engaging with what the speaker is saying

in a way that the listener has a clear sense of the speaker's intent. This may well demand additional back and forth between speaker and listener until what one says matches as closely as possible what the other hears. It is work that requires the listener to, in a sense, "leave" his own world and enter the world of the speaker, trying to understand it from the inside out, from the speaker's point of view rather than from one's own.

Challenging or disagreeing with one another feels much riskier than listening. But it need not be an aggressive or violent act. Rather than standing in the place of the speaker, when challenging, one takes a stand in a place separate from the person being confronted. It is never easy for either party. But in the Mentor Group we do it because it aerates the soil of our ideas and allows the group to move past certain "process bumps" that may be inhibiting participation in the discussion. Trusting that each of us is acting in good faith has helped make this kind of risk-taking easier.

Giving and receiving feedback, like challenging, took place on two levels: around our teaching (what was seen on video tape) and around the process of the mentor group itself. It is vulnerable work to have one's teaching scrutinized by other teachers--and even more vulnerable when you all are teachers of teachers! A bad moment of teaching might immediately call into question one's credibility as a teacher educator. It was important to remind ourselves that we weren't in the business of evaluation, but growth. And growth demands taking risks and looking hard at what needs work. Because this can be so painful, it was sometimes hard to remember that sometimes painful observations of our teaching were actually done in service to our growth. Having the foundation of trust within the group made acknowledgment of this easier.

How does one give honest feedback without offending? What do you do with feelings of anger and judgment? How do you couch negative reactions in language that will serve those who receive it? These are difficult questions with no clear cut answers. In fact, I have students who have written entire masters' theses on the subject of feedback. For the purposes of this paper I will say only that it takes a clarity about one's own purposes and assumptions and practice. Like any skill that is yet to be mastered, mistakes will be made. These mistakes will probably hurt people at times, but must be accepted as part of the group's collective learning.

One of the reasons our group worked as well as it did was that we "stayed with" each other. By this I mean that when one person had the floor, as he or she did for a whole hour each meeting (and all of us did for 10 minutes each meeting), the rest of us knew not to turn the discussion to our own problems or ideas, but to stick with the person in his or her struggle to understand his or her own teaching. Again, it required a desire to serve the learning of a colleague. More often than not, we discovered that this process served ourselves as much as it did them.

The last skill I mention, and perhaps the most critical and difficult to understand, is that of staying open. I'm not sure I can say much here without going down a spiritual path. As one presenter at this year's AERA conference in Atlanta said, "I'm not quite ready to use the 'S-word'." And yet spiritual work characterizes so much of what we do as teachers. Staying open is connected to letting go, loving, not knowing, not judging, not clinging to images of one's self.

Letting go of these "sacred stories"[5] of oneself as a teacher and looking squarely at oneself is a little bit like dying. At the risk of hyperbole, I would say that staying open to looking at oneself as a teacher is not far from what it means to stay open to death. Stephen Levine, who has worked with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and who has done a great deal of work of his own with people who are dying, says that when one opens to the mysterious process of death with a "don't know" mind,

> heaven [self as good teacher] and hell [self as bad teacher] are dissolved. It is in this open, choiceless investigation of the truth that reality presents itself. (p. 69, 1982.) (Brackets mine)

Images of oneself, especially when using video tape and seeing oneself through the eyes of others, can easily crumble, sometimes leaving little behind but self-doubt. This is where a caring group can be so crucial. "Love," Levine says, "is the bridge, (author's prefatory note)" between one's images of reality and the "truth." I won't claim we found the truth, but I do think we

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[5] I first heard this term used by Jean Clandinin in reference to students' images of who and what a teacher is, and the Academy's desire to preserve those images. (AERA conference presentation, "Still Learning to Teach," Atlanta, Georgia, 1993)

peeled away at its layers. And I think the kind of love -- this openness -- of which Levine speaks played a role.

All of the skills mentioned above are difficult ones that take regular, disciplined and rigorous practice. We have not mastered these skills; I am not sure that they ever can be mastered--how does one master being open?--but again, we value them and therefore are willing to keep working on them. One area that required a lot of openness and willingness to listen was that of decision making. I explore that process below.

Shared Decision Making

While I determined the focus and structure of our work in the first semester (looking at discussions and the use of feedback through video tapes and our own reflective journals), it was not without consultation with the other group members. After the first semester all decisions about what we would focus on and how we would work was by consensus. We have chosen to work in slightly different ways each semester, depending on our individual and group needs.

In the fall of the last two years we have worked with the video tape model described earlier in this paper. The second fall differed from the first only in *how* we would work with the video tape (choosing a five minutes clip versus looking at the whole tape), but not in its essential design. During each spring heavy schedules and new teaching assignments have conspired to make time less available, so we have been less demanding of ourselves. Last spring we found ourselves in "survival mode" -- teaching new courses and teaching lots of hours -- and chose to look at issues that arose from week to week. Despite the lack of a pre-set menu, consistent themes emerged on their own: asking the right question in discussions, using feedback effectively, and distancing oneself and one's ego from one's teaching. This spring we experimented with a new format. Members could choose how they wanted to use their hour with the group. Three out of four of us chose to reach outside the scope of our own teaching by bringing in articles and relevant chapters from books for discussion. One of us stayed with the video format. (A more detailed discussion of what we learned from this experiment follows in the section on the group's evolution.)

The results of making decisions by consensus is no surprise to those familiar with this kind of decision making. Because everyone was fully

involved in each one of these decisions the group was that much more invested in the process. The way we worked made sense to us because we had developed it ourselves. We also knew that we could adjust it as we needed to because it was under our collective control. This feeling of control was very important given the degree of vulnerability inherent in such work.

A further result of shared decision making was the shared sense of responsibility for making the group work. It was not all up to the leader. This precluded blame and complaining and encouraged action rather than reaction. Shared decision making gave each member authority--they were authors of their own experience and they had a voice. These were critical ingredients in building the group and in finding their own place within the program.

The feeling of freedom and power that comes with independent decision making was reinforced by an administration that supported and believed in what we were doing.

Administrative Support

The final factor in our success, though certainly not the least important, has been the administrative support we have been fortunate enough to receive. This support has taken both concrete and abstract form. Concretely, money was designated for the mentor position. This had a number of effects: first, it gave legitimacy to the group. Because the administration took us seriously, we more easily took ourselves seriously. The group was not just a place to chat. It became a place where serious, rigorous, disciplined exploration of teaching took place.

Secondly, because money was being spent on the mentor position, there was a certain accountability, mostly of the mentor, but also of the group members. This meant we had a regular schedule and clear responsibilities (e.g. video-taping, journaling and presenting our reflections). This in turn led to a third, indirect benefit: it helped us to remain disciplined about our work. We were accountable not only to the program but also to each other. As one group member, Bill Conley, wrote:

> The mentor's leadership in creating consistent meeting times and a structure for the group's work, gave the group meetings the flavor of a course. This helped [us] feel accountable to the group and directed our learning to

> teach in this program in a way that unstructured and solitary reflection could not match. [Bill Conley, April 1993]

Such accountability ultimately benefited not only the teachers but also the program. Again, Bill writes that

> [It] is important both in improving our teaching and in providing a means for formative self-evaluation of our progress in the absence of a formal evaluation procedure for adjuncts with no tenure potential. [Bill Conley, April 1993]

The "abstract" or less tangible support has been the administration's belief in the benefits of the group. The money was spent because its purpose was valued. This goes back to the importance of shared values--they must be shared not only by the group itself, but by the leadership of the broader program. Without this support I believe the long term success of the group would be seriously threatened and the Mentor Group might well encounter the same *cul-de-sac* as do many staff development efforts. While one might argue that a strong group can lead itself, I would argue that the role of the leader is critical, even with a highly skilled group of participants. I explore the leader's role below.

The role of the leader

I participated in the Mentor Group both as a teacher and a leader; I video-taped my class and shared my own questions and struggles in the classroom; I arranged logistical details and offered my expertise when I felt it was useful. While I have striven to make the group as egalitarian as possible, inviting as much scrutiny of myself and my own work as the others got, I was also always the mentor.

My history within the program, my greater years of experience as a teacher and teacher educator, my role as organizer and facilitator, all freed the group up to focus on themselves and their own growth. My focus was less on myself and more on "holding the whole." I consciously tried to stay aware of what each member was working on in his or her own teaching, both in a long term way (like Leslie's linking theory to practice, Bill's issues with pacing and

feedback, or Marti's distancing her sense of identity from her teaching) and during each meeting. I explicitly made links and moved them towards what I hoped were deeper levels of understanding by asking hard questions. I tried to weave threads of our discussions together with threads of former discussions. These in turn interwove with members' personal objectives, forming, what I hoped was a coherent, connected whole.

While I surely have done an imperfect job, I feel very strongly that the role of the leader is an essential one. Without attention to the whole, the edges fray and the integrity of that whole unravels leaving individual participants feeling unsafe, unsure and unable to concentrate on the work they came to do.

* * * * * *

All of these elements taken together comprised our foundation. All of them are still in evolution and continue to be tested and strengthened. We were very fortunate that they were more or less in place when we began. Other groups may find that they spend a good deal of their time establishing a foundation: an acceptance of each other and each other's beliefs, skills in working together as a group, a common discourse, a participatory approach to decision making and support from administration. Without these elements in place, progress may well be halting and slow and at times very frustrating.

This paper admittedly does not deal with how to form such a foundation if it does not already exist. I don't offer a formula for success, only the facts of one success. Let me say, however, that I think even with a very weak foundation, if a group is willing to honestly and openly face the challenges they have ahead of them, they are as good as half way there. I must recount a story from this April when the Mentor Group presented this paper in a shortened form at the International TESOL Conference. When it came time for questions, one woman stood up and said that she was involved with a peer mentoring group where there was no leader, no administrative support and enough trust among group members to be able to really work. We nodded our heads admiringly, wondering if we could be wrong about this foundation of ours that felt so important. I later heard another member of that same peer mentoring group, who had also been in the audience, confess to an old student of mine that no one in her group actually trusted anyone. I

am not sure where the truth of that group lies, except that differences like this need to be faced. It is amazing how far we will go to make what we wish were true apparent to others, but it is not a place of growth.

At this point, I would like to explore how the group built upon this foundation, looking at our growth and evolution over the course of our two years together.

The Evolution of the Group

The group seems to have evolved from a stage of "settling in" where time was spent gaining confidence and a sense of one's place in the program, towards one of "speaking out" where members have developed a voice, a clarity of their own way of teaching and some comfort with the program and other faculty members. It has been a movement from internal concerns to external ones.

In the initial phase of the group we were very self-contained. Members felt vulnerable and often relied on imitating the styles of other, established faculty, many of whom had been their teachers. They trusted those teachers' voices more than their own, and, in fact, in some cases, couldn't even hear their own voice, defining themselves, in Leslie's words, by "what we weren't instead of hwat we were." Much of our time was spent confirming and affirming each other, establishing a safety net and taking risks by exposing our teaching to one another. The group also used this time to get a sense of the program, their place in it, and how it all fit together. The relationship between the group and myself was, more clearly than at any other point, mentor and mentees.

The second phase of our development saw a movement towards confidence and strength. Members were beginning to find their voices, to rely on positive student feedback as "real" rather than lucky. They began to trust their own ideas as much as they did other faculty members'; they began to listen to their own voice. The relationship between them and myself was shifting to one of equals.

The third, or current phase seems to combine looking inward with speaking out. We have presented at two conferences and two of the group members will present at a third in June. While there is scarcely time to write, there is a desire to do so -- a sense that they have something unique and valuable to say. There is also a desire to bring into the group ideas and people

from outside. Concurrently, while group members feel less vulnerable than they did in phase one, there is more of a willingness to be vulnerable, to take more risks. A sort of bank account of good feelings about their teaching and themselves as teachers has built up and they can now begin to draw down on it. As one colleague observed, we are in a strong/vulnerable stage where our strength is in our vulnerability.

While I present these three phases as clear cut, they have not been. We still swoop back into phase one, even as we work in phase three. Our movement is a circular one, or more accurately put, an upward spiral. This is due in large part, I believe, to the organic nature of our process. For the most part we have gone where it made sense to go on a visceral level, rather than a theoretical level (like seeing our growth in phases.) This came home to us in our last meeting.

Last time we met, which was less than a week ago (it is now May 26) we spoke of how important it has always been for us to work "organically." By this I think we meant that we have followed the thrust of our own teaching needs and insights rather than conforming to frameworks and theories from outside. We acknowledged the power that resides in knowing from the inside out rather than trying to verify what we know through the eyes of an outside expert.

This spring we chose to use articles written by experts in the field as a platform for discussion about and a channel for new insight into our practice. What we found, however, was that our discussion was ungrounded. It remained on an abstract plane: What is Gee's definition of literacy? What does Peter Elbow mean by "bamboozling" ? What does XXX mean by XXX? And how do these all relate to each other? As I write this I am hard pressed to think of the substance of any one of these articles, articles that were very interesting, thought provoking and no doubt important.

By contrast, when I think back to sessions we had around the video tape or even the sessions from last spring where discussion emerged from the events of our every day life in the classroom, I can remember so much; Leslie's trying to find the right question; Paul's efforts to get a reading on whether his lesson was as good as he thought it was; Marti struggling to differentiate herself from her Teaching Anglophone Culture (TAC) class--"Marti is not TAC"; Bill's discovering how issues of pacing and use of feedback are related; my own struggle with how I handled a difficult and

emotional feedback session in one of my classes. As I list each one of these sessions, connections between them spring up. Together they seem to form a whole. The articles on the other hand, are disconnected, both from each other and from our experience. Dealing with the latter is like trying to catch helium balloons. Dealing with the former is like working with fertile earth. The latter is words, the former is experience embodied--felt and remembered--in each member of the group.

All of this is to say that what we saw as an evolution from concerns with internal issues to external ones is not a simple matter of moving from our own experience and insights to those of outside authorities. It is more complex than that. Movement to outside voices is valuable, but these voices should not drown out the voices of the group, voices that the group has worked so hard at exercising, shaping and nurturing. These "expert" voices need to be heard alongside our own, with equal volume. The ideas need to be weighed on a scale where the counter balance is our own experience, our own expertise. This suggests that readings need to be chosen very carefully so that we have enough weight at our end of the scale to prevent being flung into the atmosphere when the weight of the "expert" is dropped.

Questions and Concerns

While the closeness of the Mentor Group -- its commonly held values, the pre-existing friendships, the almost "secret" language -- contributed to its strength and success, there remains the fact of professional inbreeding and the danger of pedagogical retardation, if you will. This is of real concern. How do we translate what we know into language that the outside world can understand? One immediate answer is "by doing it;" I think we will find the words and concepts we need by being forced to find them. We can present at conferences, write papers, talk to people from outside the program, perhaps even invite people from outside the program into the group. It seems to me important to stay on an edge of sorts, between the comfort and passion of our beliefs and an openness to the possibility that we may be wrong.

A second question, especially for others interested in starting groups like ours (most particularly our students) is this: must there be a coming together of values about teaching and learning for a group to work? Can productive work happen when I, for example, strongly believe that the teacher brings in knowledge that it is her primary responsibility to convey,

and you believe it your primary responsibility to work with what students bring? Doesn't this demand an extraordinary desire to transcend differences and an exceptional ability to respect another human being, regardless of difference?

The reason that I couch these as almost existential questions is that the differences that need to be transcended are not superficial ones. Beliefs about teaching and learning run deep, and for many teachers originate in their very souls. Indeed, it would take an extraordinary group of people to be able to "let go" of their own views, and "stay with" a person whose philosophy they have taken a passionate stand *against* in their own teaching.

A further concern is the need for group skills. It is rare for a group to "flow." The egos, the fears, the needs, the filters all need to be recognized and tamed. Reflection on and examination of one's teaching--especially as a group of teacher educators *(Don't we already know how to teach? Aren't we the experts?)*--is vulnerable, threatening work and group safety should be of primary concern to all members.

Future Directions

What is next for the Mentor Group? This is actually a rather precarious time for the group. Funding for the mentor position ends this year and there is no money slated for the group to continue in its present form. So professional development for adjunct faculty is again in question. Putting aside for a moment the very important question of support for adjunct faculty, there are some alternatives.

We have already instituted a system of one-on-one peer observation within our program as a form of professional development. It seems to me a logical step to include something similar to the Mentor Group as an alternative form of professional development. Up to now the group has been limited to new faculty. It is our feeling that the group should now be mixed. In our last report to the faculty one of our most senior members said, "I'm jealous!" I think there is a willingness on both sides to integrate.

As for the mentor position, I no longer feel that the group needs a mentor as such--at least no more than we all do. But I do have serious reservations about a *group's* ability to organize and discipline itself without a funded leader. In addition, any one of the faculty, core or adjunct, is capable of "holding the whole," a function that is quite different from "just showing

up." It is my conviction that someone needs to assume that role, and to be paid for what they do--to receive that support and acknowledgment from the administration.

Another cautionary note: whatever direction we move in--publishing what we have learned, taking in new ideas from the outside, integrating with core faculty, writing--I believe *it should always come back to and be grounded in our experience as teachers.* This leads me to some final words about the role of teacher educators as learners of teaching.

Teacher educators as learners of teaching

Thus far in our program we have been fairly quiet about our Mentor Group. We have made two reports to core faculty but have kept our students relatively uninformed about the group. I think it is time that they heard.

The work that we are doing, the professional community that we have formed, is nothing short of what I would wish for our graduates "out there" in the teaching world. The power of our example needs to be recognized and exploited. If our students can learn from us that teaching *is* complex, that it *is* interesting enough to spend valuable time thinking and talking about, that it *is* a field in which one can continually grow, then I feel we will have done them an enormous service.

I feel it is our duty as teacher educators not only to continue to examine our teaching, but to pass on this spirit of inquiry and collaboration to our students and to do so explicitly: through example and dialogue.

A Final Note

Learning to teach is not a linear process nor is it a journey with an end. Paul, Marti, Leslie and Bill's issues and concerns continue to be my own. I return again and again to questions of how to work with feedback, when to push students and when to support them, how to ask the right question at the right time, how to separate my sense of self from my success or failure as a teacher... It is a circular journey. As mentor, I tried very hard never to sound patronizing or superior, although I am sure there were times when I must have. Yet I truly believed in the skill and giftedness of this group and it was not difficult to feel genuinely humbled in their presence. Traveling with this group has been my privilege.

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APPENDIX

Example of a Journal Entry

Mentor Group
Journal Entry
Approaches Class Feedback 1991
May 21, 1993

I approached this tape with not a small amount of trepidation. My memories of what came to be called BLACK THURSDAY loomed like black storm clouds and as I watched I was sure I'd be hit by lightning. I sort of watched the whole thing with my arms protecting my face. It's amazing how the intensity of the emotion I experienced at the time--fear, mostly, that I had betrayed the group by bringing to the surface things that people weren't ready to talk about and look at; that I had my agenda, which was to have a GREAT GROUP, and was laying it on the students. In fact, I think I was doing this to some extent. I just don't think the results were as disastrous as I had thought.

But it does raise the question of when to push things you think are important and when to hold back and let the group go the ways it wants to naturally go. It's the same question we seem to deal with all the time at the student level--when to challenge, when to support, how to do both simultaneously--brought to the level of the group and it's own process. How far *can* a leader bring a group? Will a "good" group form naturally almost in spite of the leader? Will a group that is problematic remain so? If they can make changes--which I think they can--can the leader push the process or is naming the process she sees the most s/he can do? I frankly think I am falling into the latter camp and would like to look at the section of tape that I have with an eye to what I did that was pushing my own agenda and what I could have done that would have given the group *insight* . I would also like your feedback on what you think was happening during the clip I'll show.

Some Background...

I decided to do this kind of major feedback for a few reasons:

1) Two students--J. C. and H. S.--had told me that they were having a hard time in class and were feeling that they couldn't participate as much as they wanted to because they got shot down.

2) We had just done CLL [Community Language Learning -- an approach to teaching languages] and students had some roughly hewn tools to begin working with each other in an understanding way.

3) (The unconscious-at-the-time motivation...) I had just come off of an incredible SMAT [the summer MAT program] class that I was absolutely in love with--and I had been experiencing frustration with

group process in my class at Harvard and I think I wanted to vicariously "fix" it by making my Approaches class "work right."

I framed the discussion by talking about my Harvard experience, saying that I wanted them to be able to use the time together well, to learn to stay with a person, to listen, and to say to each other, and me, what they were getting that they needed, what they weren't getting and what they were getting that they didn't need.

The first part of the discussion was, not surprisingly, very positive. Those who spoke were very happy and felt close to the group. Then I invited comments that weren't necessarily all positive, and J.C. stepped in. She talked about feeling bogged down with all the negativity around Silent Way [another approach to teaching languages]. She didn't want to contribute anymore, she didn't look forward to coming to class and she wanted to understand what it was she was going through--it was nothing personal. (In fact it <u>was</u> personal; she was having a hard time with L. H.) B. A. talked about the "rough edges" one encountered in any group and how she was experiencing that now in Approaches. (She was not specific.) S. M. then joined the frustration-with-the-negative camp. At this point, perhaps 20 minutes into the discussion, H. S. talks about her own reluctance to join class discussions, feeling that if she says something "off" she'll get a negative response. (I think she was referring to me, though I can't remember how my episodes with her unfolded and whether we'd resolved her anger at me or not!)

The Clip...

Anyway, it is at this point that R. F., who had said nothing up until this point, jumps in and says that everyone must be in a different class than the one she's in. She doesn't get what everyone is talking about. This back and forth with R[redacted] is what I want us to look at. What is going on and what would <u>you</u> have done? There is one place where I know I'm telling a lie. I say to R[redacted] "My task is to accept what you say as true for you. I have no vested interest in your seeing differently. What you see is different, not better or worse." But I *did* have an interest in her seeing that feedback is important and that talking about feelings can have good results. I wonder what effect this self-deception had on my ability to work clearly with the group's process.

I remember feeling that I'd gotten us in deeper than I felt comfortable with (but perhaps one never feels comfortable with this kind of discussion.) I also remember feeling that I was not sure how I wanted this all to resolve itself. What did I want from this discussion anyway? What was my objective? To have a smoothly running group of individuals who trusted each other and could give each other honest feedback that would allow them to move past the "rough edges" rubbing too painfully against each other. But *how* does one go about that?